HEALTH BASICS

Remembering tips

Remembering tips are practical ways to learn, organise, and recall everyday information.

WHAT IT IS
Practical methods for learning and recalling information

WHERE IT COMES UP
Daily tasks, appointments, medicines, names, and new information

WHY IT MATTERS
Supports safety, independence, and reliable daily routines

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
A primary care clinician or pharmacist

HOW IT IS CHECKED
History, cognitive testing, and sometimes blood tests

Overview

Remembering tips are methods that make information easier to learn or retrieve later. They include mental techniques, written reminders, phone alerts, and changes to your surroundings.

They are not a disease, diagnosis, or treatment. Everyone forgets things sometimes, especially when distracted, tired, stressed, or trying to manage too much information at once.

A forgotten name or misplaced item does not by itself mean that you have a medical condition. Memory becomes more concerning when there is a clear change from your usual ability, the problem keeps getting worse, or it affects daily activities such as taking medicines, managing money, cooking, travelling, or keeping appointments.

Remembering tips can reduce the amount of information you need to hold in your mind. They cannot identify the cause of a memory change or rule out an underlying condition.

How it works

Memory is not a single process. First, your brain must pay attention to information and take it in. This is called encoding . The brain then stores the information and retrieves it when needed.

Problems at any step can feel like forgetting. For example, you may not remember where you left your keys because your attention was elsewhere when you put them down. The information may never have been clearly encoded.

Different techniques support different parts of memory:

Repeating information over several sessions is usually more useful than trying to learn everything at once. Rest and sleep also support attention and memory. However, sleep or memory techniques cannot correct every cause of memory difficulty.

- Attention: Reduce distractions and focus on one task at a time
- Organisation: Keep related information together or divide it into smaller parts
- Association: Link new information to a familiar image, place, rhyme, or story
- Retrieval practice: Try to recall information instead of only rereading it
- External reminders: Use calendars, notes, alarms, labels, or pill organisers
- Routine: Do important tasks in the same place or at the same time

Why it matters for your health

Memory supports many everyday health tasks. You may need to remember when to take medicine, what a clinician explained, when symptoms began, or when a follow-up appointment is due.

Written instructions and reminders can reduce mistakes. For example, an up-to-date medicine list can be more reliable than trying to recall every product and dose during an appointment. This list should include prescription medicines, non-prescription products, vitamins, and supplements.

Memory also affects safety. If you sometimes forget whether you turned off an appliance or locked a door, a checklist or automatic safety device may be more dependable than repeatedly testing your memory.

These methods are supports, not tests of intelligence or effort. Using a calendar, alarm, or written list does not weaken memory. It allows you to save attention for tasks that cannot be automated.

What can go wrong

Everyday memory lapses often occur during stress, poor sleep, grief, illness, pain, or periods of

heavy responsibility. Anxiety and depression can also affect concentration, which may make information harder to learn and recall.

Some medicines can contribute to confusion, sleepiness, or memory difficulty. This may be more likely when several medicines have similar effects. Alcohol, cannabis, and other substances can also affect memory. Do not stop a prescribed medicine suddenly because you suspect it is involved. A pharmacist or prescribing clinician can review it safely.

Hearing or vision problems may look like memory trouble because information was not clearly heard or seen. Medical conditions such as thyroid disorders or vitamin B12 deficiency can sometimes affect thinking. A clinician may consider these and other possibilities based on your history.

Persistent changes can be related to mild cognitive impairment , meaning measurable thinking problems that do not fully prevent independent daily life. Memory changes can also occur with dementia, stroke, brain injury, sleep disorders, depression, or other neurological and medical conditions. Memory tips cannot distinguish among these causes.

Arrange routine medical follow-up if memory changes:

Seek urgent medical help for sudden confusion or a sudden major change in awareness. Call emergency services for confusion with facial drooping, arm weakness, difficulty speaking, a severe new headache, a seizure, loss of consciousness, or a significant head injury. These can be signs of stroke or another emergency.

- Continue for several weeks or become more noticeable
- Interfere with medicines, money, cooking, work, or travel
- Are noticed by people who know you well
- Begin after starting or changing a medicine
- Occur with changes in mood, sleep, hearing, or vision

What you can do

Choose one reliable system rather than keeping reminders in several unrelated places. This could be a paper diary, wall calendar, or phone calendar. Check it at the same time each day.

Give commonly misplaced objects a fixed home. Keep keys, glasses, hearing aids, and your wallet in the same clearly visible place. Labels or open storage may help if closed drawers make items easy to overlook.

When learning something new, pause and give it your full attention. Repeat it in your own

words. Connect it with information you already know, then test yourself after a short break. For a name, you might repeat it during the conversation and connect it with a memorable feature or context.

For important health information:

A pill organiser may help some people, but it must be filled correctly. Ask a pharmacist about packaging or reminder options if your medicine schedule is complicated. Never take an extra dose simply because you cannot remember whether you took the first one. Check the medicine instructions or contact a pharmacist or appropriate clinical service.

Keep a brief record if you notice a change. Note what happened, when it began, how often it occurs, any medicine changes, and whether sleep, stress, alcohol, illness, hearing, or vision may be involved. Specific examples are more useful at an appointment than saying only that your memory is "bad."

A primary care assessment may include questions about daily activities, a medicine review, and a short cognitive test. Depending on the situation, a clinician may suggest hearing or vision checks, blood tests, or further assessment. There is no single test that explains every memory concern.

Be cautious with products marketed as memory boosters. Supplements can cause side effects or interact with medicines, and marketing claims do not establish that a product works. Ask a pharmacist or clinician before taking one.

- Ask for written instructions or an after-visit summary
- Keep an updated medicine and allergy list
- Use alarms for medicines or appointments
- Bring a trusted person to complex appointments if you want support
- Ask whether instructions can be provided in a more accessible format

Common questions

Is occasional forgetting a normal part of ageing?

Some changes in recall can happen with age, such as taking longer to remember a name. Regularly getting lost in familiar places, being unable to manage usual tasks, or showing a clear decline from previous ability deserves medical assessment.

Does using a phone or notebook make memory weaker?

No. External reminders reduce the load on memory. They are especially useful for information

that must be accurate, such as medicine schedules and appointments.

Do puzzles prevent memory problems?

Puzzles can be enjoyable and mentally engaging, but no single game can guarantee that memory will stay unchanged. Practising one task may mainly improve performance on that task.

Can a memory test diagnose dementia?

Not by itself. A short cognitive test can identify areas that need closer assessment. Diagnosis requires a broader review of symptoms, daily functioning, health conditions, medicines, and sometimes laboratory tests or brain imaging.

What if there is nothing specific to remember?

You do not need a memory system for every part of life. Use reminders where forgetting would cause inconvenience, missed care, or a safety risk. Otherwise, there may be nothing you need to do.

Sources

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- Dementia: assessment, management and support for people living with dementia and their carers , NICE guideline NG97, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2018, updated 2025